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ABSTRACT

Higher educational institutions in the United States have reported increased enrollment of international students in recent years. The Institute of International Education projects that, by 1990, on million international students may be attending colleges and universities in the United States. A study was conducted to determine the needs, interests, and goals of undergraduate international students at the University of Maryland, College Park. Entering undergraduate international students (N=56) from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Mideast completed an anonymous questionnaire concerning their backgrounds, goals, perceptions, and attitudes regarding their education, vocational plans, social issues, and self-perceptions. The results suggest that the international undergraduate students come from diverse cultural backgrounds. The students sampled tended to be supported by family members, both economically and psychologically. Students reported feeling that meeting U.S. students and learning to think independently would be difficult adjustments. International students reported high hopes and expectations of success. Since many international students experience financial, personal, and interpersonal difficulties at U.S. institutions, appropriate support services should be provided in order to facilitate their adjustment to the United States. (NB)

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NEEDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF UNDERGRADUATE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Summary

United States higher educational institutions have reported increased enrollment of international students. The Institute of International Education projects that by 1990, a million international students may be attending colleges and universities in the U.S. The present study was conducted to determine the needs, interests and goals of undergraduate international students. The study found that the majority of international students were supported by family members. However, international students felt that meeting U.S. students and learning to think independently would be difficult adjustments. International students have high hopes and expectations of success. It should be noted that many international students experience financial, personal, and interpersonal difficulties at U.S. institutions. Therefore, appropriate support services should be provided in order to facilitate their adjustment to the United States.

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The annual census taken by the Institute of International Education (IIE) indicated that more than 300,000 foreign students were enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions. In addition, the Institute of International Education (Boyan, Julian & Rew, 1982), indicated that by 1990 a million foreign students may be enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities if their rate of increased enrollments continues.

The foreign student population on U.S. college and university campuses presents researchers and educators with a particularly difficult task. The population is difficult to characterize because international students come from more than 150 nations and attend over 2,500 schools (Manese, Leong, & Sedlacek, 1985). In addition to geographic diversity, international students differ with respect to individual variables such as native language, English proficiency, financial status, previous educational experience, and length of time in the U.S. Thus, can we classify those international students who have good English proficiency, prior U.S. education, and have been in U.S. for a few years as foreign?

In recent years international students have begun to receive more attention from the higher education community, and consequently more studies have been designed to determine the needs, goals, and characteristics of this growing college population.

Hagoon and McDonald (1967), conducted a study on demographic characteristics of international students at the College Park campus of the University of Maryland (UMCP). These investigators

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found that half of the international students sampled were undergraduates and three fourths were male. The majority were engineering majors. In a comparative study of immigrant and non-immigrant international with U.S. students on academic performance, Chapman and Sedlacek (1969), found no performance differences between immigrants and non-immigrants. However, international students did not perform as well as their U.S. counterparts. Leong and Sedlacek (1982) surveyed the incoming international student population at UMCP in cooperation with the Office of International Education Services. These researchers found that the primary concerns of international students were financial and time management. International students were less likely to be concerned about career choices or selecting a major. In a survey of incoming undergraduate international students, Manese, Leong, and Sedlacek (1985) found that incoming undergradutes had strong academic backgrounds, and the majority were interested in investigative occupations. International students expressed interest in receiving assistance in improving their writing and speaking skills. In addition, they expressed interest in educational, vocational, and emotional-social counseling.

The purpose of the present study was to further explore the needs and interests of undergraduate international students.

Method

Undergraduate international students (N=56) entering UMCP were administered an anonymous questionnaire concerning their backgrounds, goals, perceptions, and attitudes regarding their

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education, vocational plans, social issues and self-perceptions.

The sample was composed of Asians or Southeast Asians (39%), Latin-American (15%), Africans (15%), and Middle Easterners (11%). Sixty four percent (64%) were male and 33% female. Immigrants comprised one third (33%) of the sample and non-immigrants two thirds (67%).

Results

Background and Description

Over one third (38%) of the sample had lived in the U.S. from six months to one year, whereas only (23%) had been in the U.S. for less than six months. Approximantely (40%) had been in this country for two or more years. Thus, 78% of the sample reported being in the country from six months to two years. Also two-thirds (67%) of the sample had attended other high schools and colleges in the U.S.

There were a number of items which asked international students to describe themselves. Over half of the sample (53%) indicated that the most influencial persons in their lives were family, and 17% said UMCP students and friends were the most influential. Students indicated that they would turn to family if they needed help. However, job experiences (20%), course work (16%), independent study (15%), and friendships were the most significant experiences which affected student development during the past year.

When asked where they would be living during the semester, almost almost half indicated that they would be living with their parents or other relatives, and only nine percent indicated that

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they would live in residence halls.

The international students were also asked what they thought would be the most diffcult or hardest part of adjusting to college. The most frequent responses were thinking independently (18%), meeting students (16%), obtaining satisfactory grades (15%), and studying efficiently (15%).

The reason most students gave for attending UMCP was because of academic programs (52%), and geographic location (16%).

Educational Attitudes

Students indicated that they felt little pressure to decision on or choose a major. International students felt strongly that they would not drop out of school while pursuing their undergraduate degrees. They also felt strongly that they would be able to earn high grades in their courses. A large proportion of the international students indicated they intended to earn advanced degrees (46%) and over half (51%) intended to complete their bachelors' degrees. The most frequent reason given for obtaining a degree was to enter their chosen career, or to enter professional or graduate school (44%). While a small group enjoyed academic work and studying, students felt they would stop their studies only if they obtained their degrees (39%), transferred (20%), or sought employment (11%).

The most important educational objectives for students were to develop: (a) career skills (33%), (b) independence in thinking and behavior (18%), (c) a direction for career or life work (13%) and, (d) ability to express self orally (12%).

Educational philosophies were asessed using the Clark-Trow

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Typology of vocational, academic, collegiate and non-conformist, which refers to how students preceive the college environment. For the vocational type, college is seen as preparation for a career; the academic type views college as a place to pursue ideas and knowledge. The collegiate type sees college as a place for social and extracurricular activities, while the non-conformist is one who focuses more on individual interests and is most concerned about their personal style (Mason-Sowell & Sedlacek, 1982). The international students identified themselves as vocational (47%), academic (23%), collegiate (17%), and non-conformist (13%).

Vocational Goals and Attitudes

Most students decided on their vocational goals during and shortly after secondary school. A majority of the undergraduate international students were quite certain of their vocational goals.

Discussion

The results of the study in general suggest that the international undergraduate students come from diverse cultural backgrounds, and that the majority were male. Although a large proportion of international undergraduates in the sample were non-immigrant and had been in the country for more than six months, and may have attended other U.S. educational institutions, it is not clear how resident status or length of stay affects the acculturation process. Therefore it is not possible to determine whether we can classify these students as foreign or not.

Overall, the international student tended to be supported by

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family, both economically and psychologically. However, it appears that many would like an opportunity to become self-supporting. Perhaps international students can gain valuable work experience by recieving credit toward degrees, at least for those who can not work in this country due to visa restrictions.

Academically, the majority of incoming international students enter the university with positive and confident personal expections of success, and expect a rewarding and enriching experience at the university. With respect to needs and vocational expections, undergraduate international student perceived career development and vocational preparation as their most important needs. In addition, the international students were concerned about speaking and writing English, as well as being able to behave and think independently.

The findings reported in this study are based on generalized information about incoming undergraduate international students. The international student population and the sample studied was quite diverse in terms of cultural background, economic status, vocational and career goals and objectives and personal attitudes. Therefore although this study reports generalizations about international students, their differences should not be underestimated. Manese, Leong, and Sedlacek (1985) cautioned " It should not be assumed these students neither wanted or needed University support services. Problems of social adjustment, interpersonal problems and loneliness and alienation have been found in studies " (p.4). Therefore, outreach, pre-counseling, and flexible support services should be provided to the undergraduate international student.

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